Buddhism and Neoplatonism

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Cosmology, Time, Divinity, and Astrology

Comparing Buddhist and Neoplatonic Concepts

Buddhism and Platonism (and then Neoplatonism) simultaneously emerged and evolved in separate areas of the ancient world. These two traditions heavily influenced and directed the philosophical and religious trends in the Indian and Hellenistic worlds, respectively. Over the years, comparative philosophical studies have demonstrated the parallels and similarities between Buddhist and Neoplatonic thinkers. In the present volume, authors no doubt present many similar observations.

Setting aside epistemology, ethics, and soteriology, I want to look at how the two traditions—broadly speaking—viewed the world and time, as well as the divinities and forces that operate within (or outside) them. I think that it would be worth examining how the relevant thinkers understood the world itself before we address any metaphysical and doctrinal similarities. One of the main questions I want to pose is whether there was ever a genetic relationship between Buddhism and Neoplatonism. If there ever were such direct connec-

tions between them, then we should expect to see at least some level of mutual influence or at least recognition of different worldviews. In the end, as we will see, we find no such common ground. Moreover, the way the two treat time, divinity, and astrology further indicates that the traditions were disparate and separated from one another, so much so that any similarities in other areas (e.g., epistemology or reincarnation) cannot be reasonably attributed to a direct relationship at any point in history. For instance, Buddhists believed that the surface of the physical world is flat, whereas, like other Greek philosophers, Plato and his successors believed the world to be a sphere. If Platonic philosophy ever had an impact on Buddhadharma, we ought to expect some recognition of the spherical earth, but we do not.

The nature of the gods also differs between the two, largely because of how they view divinity: Buddhists believe that gods are mortal beings subject to *saṃsāra* (involuntary rebirth), whereas, for Platonists of any generation, it would have been inconceivable to suggest that the gods are subject to metempsychosis (μετεμψύχωσις), i.e., reincarnation, like humans. For Plotinus, the nature of the gods is connected with the stars and planets, whose orbits are absolute, infallible, and unerring. Although Buddhists also believe that the stars and planets are gods (or otherwise as the palaces of stellar gods), they can still be harassed by other entities and even fall out of their orbits, causing disasters for humanity.

In short, I will argue that from the ground up, Buddhism and Neoplatonism were rooted in different soils; although their branches might have touched in brief and vaguely understood ways (though this is uncertain!), I believe that we ought *not* consider the two to stem from the same or a similar species of philosophy or religious practice.

Probing Historical Connections

In his magnum opus of 2002, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, McEvilley argues for the occurrence of "significant intrusions first

from India to Greece to the pre-Socratic period, then from Greece back to India in the Hellenistic period."[1] This is a model of diffusion of philosophical thinking between India and Greece and vice-versa that, according to McEvilley, has remained unrecognized due to Western biases against Indian intellectual thought. Some of McEvilley's ideas of transmission between the Indian and Greek worlds (and vice-versa) have been criticized, but the book remains an intriguing and commendable exercise in comparative philosophy.[2] I think that McEvilley's arguments for Indian influence on pre-Socratic thinkers are strained, if only because it would be challenging to securely establish direct links between Greeks and Indians prior to the lifetime of Socrates (469–399 BCE). Attempting to establish direct links between Greeks and Indians via Iran in later centuries became a more promising endeavor, though the relationship was not robust.

The present discussion is concerned with Neoplatonism and Buddhism, which simultaneously evolved during the same centuries in different geographical locations: the Hellenistic and Sanskritic worlds. There certainly were intermediaries between these two: the Parthians (250 BCE—c. 226 CE) and Sasanians (224—c. 650). We have evidence that the early Sasanian rulers were interested in both Greek and Indian writers. A major Arabic bibliography written by Ibn al-Nadim (c. 987–988), the *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, states that the early Sasanian king Šāpur I (r. 239–270) organized a translation project that included the work of "Farmāsib the Indian" (an uncertain transcription), together with the books of the Hellenistic astrologers Dorotheus and Ptolemy, all of whose knowledge was supposedly traced back to Babylon.[3]

We must also recognize that while they might have been regarded as "foreign" by Zoroastrian authorities, "Indian" religions, in fact, existed in Parthian and Sasanian territories, even if they were never

1. McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, xxxi.

2. See Rasmussen, "Review of *The Shape of Ancient Thought*," *Philosophy East and West* 56/1 (2006): 182–91.

3. See the translation in Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm*, 2: 575.

mainstream. Buddhist and Brahmin communities are attested in eastern Iran. Some of the earliest Buddhist missionaries to China—most notably An Shigao 安世高 (fl. 148 CE)—came from the country of Aršak (C. Anxi 安息), i.e., Parthia, rather than India, a point that highlights the significant Buddhist presence in eastern Iran.[4] An early Middle Persian inscription at Naqsh-I Rustam records the triumphant words of the Zoroastrian cleric Kerdīr. This major figure served seven Sasanian kings: Kerdīr states that other religions had been vanquished, including those of the *šmny* and *blmny*, which are transcriptions of *śramaṇa* (in this context, Buddhists) and *brāhmaṇa* (Brahmins, Hindus) respectively.[5] In the third century, there were evidently members from both communities living in Sasanian domains that had only a few decades prior been under the Parthians. We can see that Buddhists and Brahmins were clearly present in Parthian territories. Later, in the seventh century, the monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664), who travelled to India between c. 629 and 645, reports that the bowl of Śākyamuni Buddha was at the time located in the Persian royal palace. He identifies the Persian capital as Surasthāna (likely a Sanskrit transcription of Āsōristān, i.e., Babylon). He further reports that two or three monasteries of the Sarvāstivāda tradition exist in Persia.[6]

Another point to consider is that Zoroastrians were not unfamiliar with foreign philosophy. There are Middle Persian terms for foreign philosophers: the Greek philosophers were the *fīlāsōfā* (cf. φῐλόσοφος), while the Indian sages were the *dānāg ī hindōg* ("the wise of India").[7] There were clearly some opportunities for Greek and Indian philoso-

4. See the discussion of Parthia and Buddhism in China in Kotyk, *Sino-Iranian and Sino-Arabian Relations in Late Antiquity:*, 18–28.

5. For a translation and further details see: BeDuhn, "The Co-formation of the Manichaean and Zoroastrian Religions in Third-Century Iran," 4; MacKenzie, "Kerdir's Inscription," 58.

6. Kotyk, *Sino-Iranian and Sino-Arabian Relations in Late Antiquity*, 35, 86–8. Deeg, "An Uncivilized Empire: Xuanzang on Persia," i, 120–2.

7. Shaki, "FALSAFA, philosophy." {iranicaonline.org/articles/falsafa}, accessed 17 October 2024.

phers or at least their ideas to interface either directly or indirectly via Iranian intermediaries or even in Iranian lands.

Based on the above data, one could reasonably conceive of a scenario in which Buddhist and Neoplatonic thinkers might have, in fact, interacted. The available evidence indicates that in the Greek-speaking world, there was an interest in Indian and Persian philosophies. One prominent example of this is Porphyry, who states that Plotinus studied under Ammonius, further explaining that "he acquired such a philosophical disposition that he became keen to try and learn the philosophy practiced among the Persians, too, and the system perfected by the Indians."[8] The content of this Persian philosophy is uncertain, but Hellenistic philosophers were at least aware of it.

While it would be challenging to argue that Buddhists had any substantial knowledge of Greek (Skt. Yavana) philosophers, we can say that Greek and Syriac authors in the Eastern Mediterranean indeed had some knowledge of Indian religions and *perhaps* even contacts with Indian clerics of different traditions.[9] Kubica notes that "Megasthenes is the first Greek historian to mark the differences between the brāhmaṇas (Βραχμάναι) and the śramaṇas (Γαρμᾶναι or Σαρμᾶναι)." Kubica further notes that Clement of Alexandria (b. 150, d. 211–215) "also made a mention of the Samanas among the Bactrians (Σαμαναῖοι Βάκτρων). This version of the name of the Śramaṇas is also attested in the works of Origen (184/185–253/254 CE) and Por-

8. See the translation in Gerson et al., *Plotinus: The Enneads*, 18–19.

9. We need not assume that Buddhists were entirely oblivious to Greek philosophy, but I have never had the impression that Buddhists in any time period recognized any philosophical or religious elements from their own traditions as stemming from a Greek (*Yavana*) source. If Buddhist authors had ever seriously engaged in debates with Greek philosophy, we have no evidence of it. Buddhists were aware of the Greek written language. In Jñānagupta/Shenajueduo's 闍那崛多 (523–600/605?) Chinese translation of a Buddhist scripture (C. *Fo benxing ji jing* 佛本行集經, *Sūtra of the Collection of the Past Activities of the Buddha*), there is a reference to the script of the "Yavanī" (Ionians, i.e., Greeks or perhaps Bactrians). See Kotyk, "The Study of Sanskrit in Medieval East Asia: China and Japan," 243, n. 5.

phyry (ca. 234–305 CE) quoting Bardaisan (154–222 CE)."[10] Bardaisan of Edessa wrote a now-lost treatise on India. Based on the extant fragments, he apparently had met with Indian ambassadors, but the historicity of this record is uncertain. Earlier Greek and Latin sources could have just as easily been the source of knowledge of India for Bardaisan and his circle in Edessa on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. For instance, Andrade has argued that Bardaisan's information regarding statues and ordeals "apparently represents an amalgam of Bardaisan's creativity and material from Greek literature."[11]

We are left wondering just how much credible contact actually occurred between Indian religion and the Greek or Syriac authors whose writings survive, whether it be Plotinus or Bardaisan. Lacrosse argues that the evidence "seems to support the view that there was a 'dreamlike' and 'impressionist', but nevertheless broadly accurate, knowledge of Indian philosophy and culture in the Roman Empire at the time of Plotinus and Porphyry and also in their intellectual circles."[12]

In light of the above, I believe that we can reasonably discuss the *possibility* of Buddhists influencing Neoplatonists and vice-versa, but only with a great amount of caution. We can see that *typological* comparisons of Neoplatonism and Mahāyāna Buddhism reveal some similarities that would make us wonder whether, in late antiquity, there was ever a *genetic* or direct relationship between the two. For instance, in Yogācāra thought, as Vasubandhu formulates it, there is the theory of three natures (Skt. *tri-svabhāva*) of cognitive experience. These are types of cognition generated from either (1) mistaken perceptions

10. Kubica also points out: "It is significant that the name Śramaṇas (Σαρμᾶναι) relates to the Sanskrit *Śramaṇa*, while the Samanas (Σαμαναῖοι) to the Pāli version *Samaṇa*" (*Greco-Buddhist Relations in the Hellenistic Far East*, 76–7.)

11. Andrade argues "that the ethnographic knowledge of Bardaisan's literary circle was much more indebted to intertextual engagements with Greek and Latin material available to a contemporary Roman readership than to information collected from 'eastern' contacts and connections, as scholars sometimes surmise. (See Andrade, "Bardaisan's Disciples and Ethnographic Knowledge in the Roman Empire," 293–4, 296–7.

12. Joachim Lacrosse, "Plotinus, Porphyry, and India: a Re-Examination," 112.

(*parikalpita-svabhāva*) or (2) causes and conditions (*paratantra-svabhāva*, i.e., dependent on others), and then 3. the perfected cognition (*pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*) that conforms to ultimate reality. As Sabo discusses, these are respectively comparable in Plotinus' thought to the (1) World Soul, (2) Noûs, and (3) One.[13] Although such parallels remain noteworthy, as I will explain below, the worldviews and cosmologies of Buddhist authors and Plotinus, when critically compared, reveal far more differences than similarities.

Worldviews: space

In its early formulations, Buddhism firmly rejected any intelligent design, e.g., a creator who crafts the world, although as we will see later, Mahāyāna conceived of buddhas as cosmic world-builders. In his summary of Buddhist cosmology in the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāsya* from the third or fourth century CE, Vasubandhu explains that there is no creator of the world, but that it comes into existence as the fruition of all beings' karma:

> Who created the variety of the world of living beings and the receptacle-world which we have described in the preceding chapter? It was not a god who intelligently created it.
>
> 1a. The variety of the world arises from action.
>
> The variety of the world arises from the actions of living beings.[14]

This worldview is different from that of the *Timaeus*, in which the Demiurge (Δημιουργός) forges the world. Whether we read this as a divine intelligence or impersonal organizing principle, the Platonic position sees the world as something built based on a rational order. Vasubandhu would have disagreed, arguing that the world arises without any plan or order because it is the sum result of living beings whose

13. Sabo, "Plotinus and Buddhism," 495.

14. See the translation in La Vallée Poussin, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu*, 2: 551.

karma (past and present actions) directs how the world develops. The inhabitants would also include the gods, but they have no more role to play as cosmic architects than do humans and animals.

According to the Buddha (as he is represented in various scriptures) and Buddhist authorities such as Vasubandhu, the surface of our world is stationary and disc-shaped, atop which are a great sea and four continents, each positioned in one of the four quarters: Jambūdvīpa in the south (where we live), Pūrvavideha in the east, Aparagodānīya in the west, and Uttarakuru in the north.[15] These four continents surround Mount Sumeru, an enormous hourglass-shaped mountain that itself is surrounded by shorter circles of mountain ranges (Skt. *cakravāla*). The Sun and Moon orbit around Mount Sumeru at an altitude that is half that of the mountain. Having cast off the asuras, Indra lives atop the mountain.[16] Above him are various heavens, including that of Brahma, the first being who appears when the physical world as a whole reappears after its earlier destruction. He mistakenly believes himself to be the creator of the world because the first devas are reborn after him, but like all gods, Brahma is a mortal being (Skt. *sattva*) and subject to involuntary rebirth (Skt. *saṃsāra*) after the karma for his present state expires.[17]

We should note that some Buddhists would have been aware of an alternative cosmology based on the sphere. In the early centuries of the Common Era, Hellenistic astronomy and astrology were trans-

15. Even today, not all Buddhist authorities accept the sphericity of the earth. In my travels in India and Nepal, I spoke with a number of young monks from remote regions, such as Lahaul and Spiti, who explained that their monastic schools still teach the Buddhist view of Mount Sumeru, with no awareness of the globe. Although they might use airplanes, mobile phones, and the internet, modern cosmology has not necessarily been adopted by all Buddhist traditions.

16. The *Abhidharmakośa-bhāsya* is a canonical source that mentions Indra's (Śakra) palace atop Mount Sumeru. See La Vallée Poussin, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣbandu*, 2: 463–4.

17. Classical Buddhist cosmology is described at length in chapter three of the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāsya*. For the section on the physical geography of the world, see La Vallée Poussin, *2:* 451–6. For an accessible overview of Buddhist cosmology, see Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 32–49.

lated into Sanskrit, a key part of which was the concept of the spherical earth that is necessary for accurate measurements of latitude. Dating to the fourth or fifth century CE, the *Sūrya-siddhānta* is a major Sanskrit treatise on mathematical astronomy that uses the sphere but also reconceives of Mount Sumeru (also called Meru): "A collection of manifold jewels, a mountain of gold, is Meru, passing through the middle of the earth-globe, and protruding on either side."[18] In this model, the mountain is preserved, but the earth's surface is treated as spherical rather than flat. We might imagine that the cultural significance of Mount Sumeru could not be so easily ignored, hence it was retained.

In theory, Buddhists *could have* worked with this spherical model without rejecting the testimony of the Buddha, but my readings of Abhidharma and other later Buddhist works would indicate that Buddhists consistently held the earth's surface to be flat. Indian astronomers and presumably many learned Buddhists (e.g., those who had studied astronomy as part of a general Brahmin education) understood the earth's sphericity, but this did not filter into Buddhist literature. Later, in the seventh century, following the advent of complex ritual systems ("Tantric Buddhism"), Buddhists found it necessary to know when an eclipse would occur, but such technical expertise was not part of Buddhadharma. Buddhists were compelled to defer to authorities on astronomy—a "worldly science"—but interestingly, such astronomers would have had to work with a spherical model if they had wanted to accurately predict eclipses (and they certainly possessed the means to do this), while their ecclesiastical counterparts were content with a flat earth. This is an interesting instance in which we can infer that Buddhists, in fact, rejected the sphere, albeit without directly addressing the problem.[19]

18. See the translation in Burgess, *Translation of the Sūrya-siddhānta*, 285.

19. One relevant Buddhist scripture from this later period (seventh to eighth century) is the *Susiddhikara-sūtra*, which calls for certain ritual activities to be carried out during

The Platonic tradition, in contrast, utilized spherical cosmology from the beginning. *Timaeus* (33b) relates the creation of the spherical shape of the cosmos (σφαιροειδές) by the Demiurge. The whole of Heaven is also spherical (62d).[20] For Plotinus, Heaven (οὐρανός) is "the 'vault' of the planetary orb, containing the stars and planets and their spheres."[21] In fact, such concepts are found in much earlier popular Greek texts that deal with astronomy. Mastorakou has discussed Aratus, whose "only extant work is his *Phaenomena*, an astronomical poem of 1154 hexameter lines, which was written while he was in Pella at the court of Antigonus Gonatas in the years following 276 BCE." Aratus discusses the circles of the celestial sphere, among other astronomical topics.[22] Like philosophers, common people would have known about the spherical earth and heavens. Buddhists, on the other hand, do not mention these.

Considering the diametric differences in how Buddhists and Greeks conceived of the physical earth and heavens, it would be challenging to argue that there were either mutual or unidirectional influences. If Buddhists had ever seriously argued with Platonists or any Greek philosophers, they should have refuted or at least discussed the sphere. Conversely, if Plotinus really had had any interaction with Buddhists (or Indians) in any significant way, the different cosmology would have become immediately apparent, but we do not see this in the extant literature. The views on time between the two traditions were also dissimilar.

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lunar and solar eclipses. See translation and discussion in Kotyk, "Astronomy and Calendrical Science in Early Mikkyō in Japan," 458.

20. See the Greek and corresponding English translation in Bury, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, *9:* 60–1, 158–9.

21. See this definition in Gerson et al., *Plotinus: The Enneads*, 915.

22. Mastorakou, "Aratus and the Popularization of Hellenistic Astronomy," 384.

Worldviews: time

The Buddhist conception of time is linear but infinite. The past is infinite (i.e., there is no beginning to time because everything must have a cause), so every being effectively has infinite past karma trailing behind them. This means that they may be reborn in any of the six paths if the corresponding past karma ripens: in hell (Skt. *naraka*) or as a *preta* ("hungry ghost"), animal, asura, human, or god (Skt. *deva*). All of these states are temporary (although some lifespans may extend over immeasurable but still finite years), so even a being in hell is eventually freed from such a terrible state, although the cycle of migration from lifeform to lifeform will continue *ad infinitum* until cessation occurs.

These six paths are part of the "desire realm" (Skt. *kāma-dhātu*), but there are still yet higher states of existence in the "form realm" (Skt. *rūpa-dhātu*) and "formless realm" (Skt. *ārūpya-dhātu*) that are increasingly subtle and only achieved through advanced states of meditation. The highest states are free from all conceptions of identity, beings, places, objects, and materiality (they are purely mental states). One may attain such a state as a human during advanced states of meditation (Skt. *dhyāna*) and then return to one's normal embodiment, but rebirth in these highest states is also possible postmortem.

We might initially be inclined to draw a parallel between these higher states and the Neoplatonic intelligible world (ἐκεῖ) that includes the soul and intellect, but the form and formless realms in Buddhism are *not* eternity (αἰών), i.e., outside time. In Buddhism, the higher states of existence might be detached from materiality, but they are still subject to time, since these are temporary existences, even if they are extremely subtle. Unlike the worldview of Plotinus, the Buddhist cosmos does not distinguish between the material world and an eternity outside time and space; every sentient being, from the gods to those in hell, simultaneously exists in the same timeline and world.

Some might mistakenly think that the aforementioned higher states are true liberation from *saṃsāra*, but they are still not equivalent to *nirvāṇa* (cessation of personal existence) because there remains a lingering sense of self (Skt. *ātman*), albeit very minute. The minds in these disembodied states eventually fall back down, and the cycle of *saṃsāra* continues for them. In early Buddhist thought, it is only arhats (and the Buddha is an arhat) who achieve true *nirvāṇa*. Having realized that all states of existence—from hell up to the formless realm and everything in-between—are suffering, they pursue the total termination of their mental continuity. They clear their minds of all desire and fully realize non-self (Skt. *anātman*), thereby terminating the twelve links of dependent origination (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*) that perpetuate rebirth lifetime after lifetime. The continuity of personal existence (mental and physical) is irreversibly extinguished at death for the arhat. Their continuity stretches back into the infinite past, but they will have no infinite future ahead of them because they will not undergo rebirth. All other beings will have an infinite future ahead of them unless they also achieve *nirvāṇa*. There is no soul in Buddhism, so there is no sense of a descended soul returning to a higher state. The arhat has entirely extinguished their mental continuity and will no longer be a part of *saṃsāra* when the karma for their present physical form expires.[23] There is no eternity or some other transcendental realm for the arhat: their continuity ceases.

As an innovative tradition stemming from older Buddhist models, Mahāyāna builds on the above framework but abandons the idea of becoming an arhat in favor of becoming a bodhisattva. Rather than pursuing a terminal end to oneself in *saṃsāra* through *nirvāṇa*, the bodhisattva aspires to become a buddha by passing through ten stages or "grounds" (Skt. *bhūmi*) in order to assist immeasurable beings,

23. For some of the data above, I consulted the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism. See also the overview of Buddhist beliefs related to karma and rebirth in Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 32–49.

but this process requires three incalculable periods (in other words, a great many lifetimes). As the bodhisattva does this, they progressively acquire various supernatural powers, including the ability to simultaneously project multiple emanations into different locations and assist beings in distress. It was only reasonable to pray to prominent bodhisattvas (one of the most famous being Avalokiteśvara), who were believed to be accessible and helpful to people, even if they generally remained invisible to us. These advanced bodhisattvas possess great wisdom, so they do not suffer or fall into involuntary and uncontrolled rebirths. They naturally remain active among all sentient beings in order to help them because all bodhisattvas possess great unconditional compassion. Unlike the arhats, the Mahāyāna buddhas have not "extinguished" their continuities; instead, they continue to participate in our collective reality and timeline. Amitābha Buddha, for instance, resides in *his* western realm of Sukhāvatī (another world system separated from our own). Having earlier vowed to save all beings who call his name, he generated Sukhāvatī to receive any and all who would do so.[24]

The Mahāyāna conception of "buddha-fields" (Skt. *buddhakṣetra*) starts to skirt around notions of an intelligent being generating worlds (in this case, a buddha). Our world—called Sahā—is in a process of positive transformation under Śākyamuni Buddha. In this framework, the Buddha is an omniscient (but not omnipotent) intelligence that is slowly transforming sentient beings into awakened beings (bodhisattvas) as best it can. Sukhāvatī, in contrast, is supervised by Amitābha and does not have the same circumstances as our world.

Mahāyāna might vehemently deny that buddha-fields are technically "created" by buddhas, but instead would likely fall back to the notion of collective karma. In other words, a bodhisattva becomes a buddha and then spontaneously generates a buddha-field to which beings are attracted based on their past links with that buddha. How-

24. Ibid., 155–61, 173.

ever, we can still detect a strong sense of a "world-maker" in such a model: buddhas are unimaginably powerful and compassionate forces. Hence, they provide "fields" in which ordinary beings can slowly but surely flourish. A buddha is not a creator of time and space (e.g., the laws of karma and causality are not put into motion by any buddha), or a first cause for that matter, but they do shape worlds and the beings in them.

The karma of its inhabitants largely determines the features of a buddha-field, but some Mahāyāna scriptures imply that the supervising buddha also influences the world through teaching and fostering the growth of the beings who reside under them. This is expressly stated in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, a major Mahāyāna scripture. In Chapter 9 (Thurman's translation), bodhisattvas visiting from the buddha-field of the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa explain that

> the Tathāgata does not teach the Dharma by means of sound and language. He disciplines the bodhisattvas only by means of perfumes. At the foot of each perfume-tree sits a bodhisattva, and the trees emit perfumes like this one. From the moment they smell that perfume, the bodhisattvas attain the concentration called "source of all bodhisattva virtues.'" From the moment they attain that concentration, all the bodhisattvas-virtues are produced in them.

This, we read, stands in stark contrast to the realm of Buddha Śākyamuni.

The wise layman Vimalakīrti remarks on the hardships of our world, stating that "by means of these varied explanations of the Dharma, the Buddha trains the minds of those living beings who are just like wild horses. Just as wild horses or wild elephants will not be tamed unless the goad pierces them to the marrow, so living beings who are wild and hard to civilize are disciplined only by means of discourses about all kinds of miseries." Clearly, there are major differences between the buddha-fields of Gandhottamakūṭa and Śākyamuni. These differences are the result of how these two buddhas respectively

teach and, in some instances, tame the sentient beings who reside in them. Some beings just require tough love, whereas others are more easily taught. Our world is shaped by Śākyamuni, who in this context is a transcendental intelligence rather than a flesh and blood teacher walking the earth. The many struggles that beings face constitute a kind of training ground. Vimalakīrti even comments, "The great compassion of the bodhisattvas who reincarnate here is extremely firm. In a single lifetime in this universe, they accomplish much benefit for living beings." The world's teleology is effectively one of generating and encouraging bodhisattvas, who individually will eventually do the same in the (distant) future.[25]

The Mahāyāna concept of buddha-fields that we see in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* departs from the Abhidharma notion of collective karma explained in the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāsya*. The difference stems from the view of the Buddha (or buddhas): in the Mahāyāna, a buddha is a transcendental intelligence that shapes the world in a powerful but not omnipotent way, whereas, for Vasubandhu, the Buddha and all past buddhas were effectively arhats who upon death no longer interact with the world. For the time being, we have memories of the Buddha and records of the Buddhadharma (his teachings), but the arhat Śākyamuni is dead and no longer directly influencing our world. Conversely, the Mahāyāna version of Śākyamuni describes him as a kind of benevolent teacher operating behind the scenes as a transcendental force.

From a polytheist point of view, Mahāyāna buddhas and the advanced bodhisattvas could easily be conceived of as "gods," although the tradition itself (past and present) would reject such a designation. In the Buddhist worldview, the devas (gods including Brahma, Indra, and Agni, for example) are regarded as feeble, even if they possess varying degrees of supernatural powers comparable to the buddhas and

25. See the English translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* from Tibetan by Robert Thurman from the 84000 Project. {https://84000.co/translation/toh176}

bodhisattvas. The devas are "worldly" in the sense that they remain trapped in *saṃsāra*, hence they cannot be relied upon if one seeks true liberation from suffering and *saṃsāra*.

In short, the Mahāyāna buddhas and bodhisattvas are immortal and wise divinities, whereas the worldly devas are mortal and ignorant. Non-Mahāyāna Buddhists (pejoratively called the "Hīnayāna" by Mahāyāna authors) would have had fewer issues, simply because in their vision, even if the buddhas and arhats had some supernatural abilities (e.g., seeing past lives or witnessing things at a distance), they did not have the sort of godly powers that Mahāyāna figures possess.

This type of distinction between wise and ignorant divinities would have been alien to Plotinus. The daemons (δαίμων) are technically inferior to gods, but their existence is due to an organizing principle from the top down rather than any agency or past karma. In the *Enneads*, this point is explicitly stated as follows:

> Are individual things the way they are because of physical necessities and consequences and are they as well as they can be? In fact, they are not; rather, an expressed principle produces everything like this by ruling it and wants it to be so and itself produces in accordance with reason what we call evils since it does not want everything to be good, just as a craftsman does not fashion every part of the living beings as eyes. And so an expressed principle, too, did not fashion everything as gods, but some things as gods, others as daemons, a secondary nature, next human beings and other animals in sequence, not because of grudging but because an expressed principle contains a variegated intellectual world. (*Enn*., III 2 [47].11.3–9)[26]

The daemons are also not free agents with past and future lives, so it would be unreasonable to suggest that daemons and devas are really comparable. Moreover, in Buddhism, no intelligence or principle intentionally crafts the varying types of beings ranging from gods to animals in the world (again, past karma projects a being into a new

26. See the translation in Gerson et al., *Plotinus: The Enneads*, 264.

state). The god-like bodhisattvas attained their states through wisdom and merit rather than any design by decree (even if a buddha or several of them coached and encouraged them along the way).

Another important point to reemphasize here is that in the Mahāyāna worldview, the buddhas, bodhisattvas, devas, and humans all coexist in the same time and space. As an example, if I should sincerely call out Amitābha's name and ask for salvation, then the expectation is that I should be reborn in Sukhāvatī after I die, notwithstanding some potential conditions, such as my actions in the present lifetime and past life karma. Between now and my death, Amitābha remains present in Sukhāvatī, while Sūrya rides atop the solar palace and Indra looks down toward him from atop Mount Sumeru. Amitābha and Avalokiteśvara do not reside in a transcendental realm or state outside time and space (eternity), even if they are awakened beings ("enlightened") who have transcended *saṃsāra*, unlike the gods Sūrya and Indra, who will eventually die. The buddhas can foresee the future, but they cannot travel backwards or forwards through time. Amitābha is on the same linear timeline as myself and Indra, rather than dwelling in eternity outside time. Even if the perception of time is different for Amitābha, there is a process between now and my postmortem rebirth from here to Sukhāvatī somewhere in the remote west. In Sukhāvatī, there is still the passage of time.

This view of divine beings would be incompatible with Plotinus' ontology. First, for Plotinus, the gods do not normally operate within the world of corporeality. They are in eternity, beyond time, a point he describes as follows:

> But just as the expressed principle unfurls itself from a dormant seed and makes a transition, as it thinks, to something large, obliterating the largeness by the fact that it has divided itself, and instead of a unity in itself, it squanders its unity no longer in itself and proceeds to a weaker extension; indeed, in the same way, the soul, too, as it produces, in imitation of the intelligible world, a sensible universe which moves not with the motion found in the intelligible world, but one that aims to

> have the sameness of an image, temporalized itself by creating time in place of eternity. (*Enn.*, III 7 [45].11.24–31)[27]

Time is a moving image of eternity (*Tim.* 37d); therefore, it would not make sense to position gods within time (at least not normally). In Plato's *Symposium* (202d–203a), Diotima tells Socrates that the daemons are intermediary beings between the divine and earth, while expressly stating that god does not mix with a human (θεὸς δὲ ἀνθρώπῳ οὐ μείγνυται).[28] Based on this alone, however, it would be unwise to dogmatically assume that gods cannot operate in time. Iamblichus explains the human response to a direct firsthand vision of the gods:

> Furthermore, the fineness of the light which the gods radiate is such that the eyes of the body are not able to tolerate it, but even suffer the same thing as fishes when drawn from the muddy and thick wet element to thin and transparent air. For human beings who gain a vision of the divine fire, since they are not able to breathe the fineness of the divine fire, they become feeble, to all appearances, and are shut off from the vital breath that is cognate to them. (*De. My.* II. 8.4–7)

This sort of vision occurs in physical reality, not a mental or dream state, as is clear from Iamblichus' subsequent comments about lesser divinities: "The advent of angels leaves the temperature of the air endurable so that it is actually possible for theurgists to engage with it."[29] These are special instances in which a theurgist interacts with a divinity in the material world, but it is still extraordinary. During such an event, a god (or angel) can operate in time and also physical space, but this is not their normal mode. Whether such experiences were familiar to Plato or Plotinus is uncertain, but Iamblichus had the belief that divinities could be directly met in our physical world under certain circumstances.

27. See the translation in Gerson et al., *Plotinus: The Enneads*, 348.

28. For the Greek here, I have consulted the Perseus Digital Library. Translations of Plato are from the Loeb edition.

29. See the translation in Clarke et al., *Iamblichus: De mysteriis*, 104–5.

Buddhism—either in its earlier strata or Mahāyāna—does not have a concept of eternity that could be comparable to what we read in the Enneads. The closest concept to eternity vs. time would be that of ultimate reality (Skt. *paramārtha-satya*) and conventional reality (Skt. *saṃvṛti-satya*) as they are articulated in Madhyamaka. The conventional is how ordinary beings generally perceive the world (e.g., the Sun rises and sets during the day). The ultimate is how things *really* are: they are empty (Skt. *śūnya*) of any inherent existence or nature (Skt. *sva-bhāva*) because they all arise due to causes and conditions (and all those causes and conditions have immeasurable causes and conditions), meaning that all phenomena—including the passage of time and all the objects we perceive—dissolve when analyzed with the correct understanding. Ordinary beings are habituated to perceive objects as real and substantial rather than as illusory, leading them to all manner of cravings and the consequential torments that follow. But emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*) is an epistemological and *not* ontological concept.[30] Buddhas do *not* reside in ultimate reality while ordinary beings stay in conventional reality.

The two realities are two perspectives. The difference is that those with wisdom truly understand ultimate reality and thereby understand the illusory quality of all perceived phenomena, including the passage of time, and are less subject to hazardous emotions and harmful behaviors the greater their realization (having gained total realization, a buddha has no such afflictions). Realization of ultimate reality does not eliminate the passage of time or have one ascend into a timeless eternity; rather, one just properly understands the illusory quality of time and perceived phenomena. This cannot be equated to the Neoplatonic idea of eternity, which is ontological and a necessary part of the structure of reality as Plotinus frames it.

30. For a discussion of Madhyamaka and emptiness, see Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 114–24.

Perfect vs. imperfect orbits

Having discussed space and time, we can turn to how Buddhists and Neoplatonists viewed the orbits of the planets. The early strata of Buddhist literature—partly represented by the Pali canon and the Chinese translations of the Āgamas—do not express any systematic knowledge of the five visible planets (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury). Similarly, the Vedas are unaware of the planets.[31] Systematic knowledge of the planets was developed in Mesopotamia before it spread to the Greek world and later the Indian.[32] In contrast, Plato certainly knew of the planets. In *Timaeus* (38c), we read that "the sun and moon and five other stars, which bear the appellation of 'planets,' came into existence for the determining and preserving of the numbers of Time." The concept of the "planets" (πλανητά) as wandering but orderly stars was already long established by Plato's lifetime (427–347 BCE) by figures such as Thales of Miletus (c. 620 BCE—c. 546 BCE). Also, in the *Timaeus*, we read that "when God had made the bodies of each of them He placed them in the orbits along which the revolution of the Other was moving, seven orbits for the seven bodies" (38c-d).[33] The planets were set in motion by the Demiurge; thus, we should expect that they will remain constant and consistent. The planets remained important in the Neoplatonic tradition, but they were treated not only as ensouled beings, but also as gods. Plotinus also adds that "the sun is also a god—because it is ensouled—and the other stars" (V 1[10].2.39–40).[34]

In the *Dīrghāgama*, we find an account of the arising of the physical world according to the testimony of the Buddha. In brief, he states that after the conflagration of the earlier world, when the present

31. Geslani et al., "Garga and Early Astral Science in India," 165.

32. One classic study on the transmission of Greek astronomy to India is Pingree, "The Recovery of Early Greek Astronomy from India."

33. See the translation in Bury, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, 9: 78–9.

34. See the translation in Gerson et al., *Plotinus: The Enneads*, 535.

world is about to emerge, a being falls from a higher heaven into the domain of Brahma. Alone, he hopes that others will join him. When the other devas appear before Brahma, he proclaims himself to be the Creator. The world below is pitch black, as there is no Sun, Moon, or stars. The spontaneously arising earth coalesces below (the appearance of landmasses), which the devas sample and increasingly devour, leading them to lose their natural luminosity and ability to fly. At the time, having lost their light, the beings found themselves in a great abyss. Some long time later, a great explosive wind blows down into the great sea to a depth of 84,000 *yojana*s, from which the solar palace emerges. The Sun is positioned along a path halfway to the height of Mount Sumeru, around which it revolves, and the passage of days is thus counted from this time on.[35] Like in *Timaeus*, the conceptualization of time is connected with the Sun, but in the *Dīrghāgama*, no agent is mentioned. The Sun (the Moon is not mentioned) is simply drawn out of the depths of the sea before it settles along an orbit at an altitude half that of Mount Sumeru. We might speculate that this is an earlier creation myth that was simply transferred into Buddhism. The spontaneity of things arising hints at a conscious effort to disavow any sort of creative agency or intelligence underlying the formation of the physical world and the demarcation of time.

For Buddhists, the motions of the Sun and the Moon were not considered absolute and perfect. The early Buddhists envisioned these two as palaces housing societies of devas that orbit around Mount Sumeru (the well-known icon of Sūrya in a chariot pulled by horses only appears much later in Buddhism). Although the solar and lunar devas are divine, they can be assaulted by the asura Rāhu (also called Rahūla), who grasps them and causes eclipses. For instance, we have two extant versions of a certain story that tell of the Moon being grasped by Rāhu: one version in the *Saṃyuktāgama-sūtra* (preserved

35. See the Chinese translation of the *Dīrghāgama*: Taishō canon vol. 1, text no. 1, 145a6-b15.

in Chinese translation) and another in the *Candima-sutta* in the Pali *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (2.9).[36] An eclipse was regarded as a deviation from an otherwise orderly motion. Moreover, the lunar devas could be harassed by an evil entity, requiring them to seek assistance from the Buddha.

Plotinus would have disagreed that the Moon or the intelligences connected with it could be injured or frightened. In the Enneads (II 9 [33].8.35–6), we read, "For things that do indeed make people bad in the sublunary region are not present in the heaven, nor is the badness of body, troubled and troubling, present there."[37] In other words, according to Plotinus, the divinity of the Moon is unlike the people and creatures in the sublunar sphere, who all suffer and are subject to evils. Buddhists, in contrast, thought that Candra and the lunar devas could suffer terribly.

The Āgamas and Pali canon were finalized before any systematic Buddhist knowledge of the planets. The planets appear to be more clearly known to Buddhists from the fourth or fifth century CE because they appear in Mahāyāna texts whose Chinese translation dates we can often confidently determine. Buddhabhadra's (358–429) translation of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* (c. 420 CE) explains that the bodhisattva might be proficient with the Sun, Moon, five stars (planets), and twenty-eight *nakṣatra*s among other worldly sciences.[38] At this stage in Buddhist history, the planets were only beginning to appear. From the second half of the seventh century, the planets become more commonly worshipped deities in Mantrayāna (Vajrayāna, "Tantric Buddhism"). In some instances, it is even thought that the orbits of the Sun and Moon could deviate, which would be highly anomalous. For instance, the *Dhāraṇī-samuccaya-sūtra*, whose Chinese translation was carried out in 654 by Atikūṭa 阿地瞿多, gives a *dhāraṇī* (incanta-

36. Kotyk, "The Moon as a Celestial Body and God in the Buddhist Worldview, 7–9.
37. See the translation in Gerson et al., *Plotinus: The Enneads*, 219.
38. Taishō canon vol. 09, text no. 278, 556c6.

tion), explaining that "the power of this *dhāraṇī* subdues [anything], moving mountains, stopping streams, drying up the great sea, and pulverizing mountains like they were dust. If the Sun and Moon deviate from their degrees [of expected motion], then [this *dhāraṇī*] can make them correctly move, dissipating all disasters...."[39]

The idea of planets (including the Sun and Moon) deviating from their expected motions is a major difference from Neoplatonism. Buddhists believe that this phenomenon could really occur, the error not being in the eye of the observer. Conversely, for Plotinus and Hellenistic astronomers, any perceived deviation of planetary motion would be an observational error on the part of the human rather than the planet itself changing from its expected course. Plotinus describes the motion of heaven as moving in a circle "because it is imitating Intellect" (*Enn*., II 2 [14].1.1).[40] Elsewhere, he further emphasizes the orderliness of heavenly motions. In his criticisms of the Gnostics, he states the following:

> And outrageous to say that our soul—even the soul of the basest of human beings—is immortal and divine but that the entire universe and the stars up there, though they are composed of much better and purer elements, do not have a share in an immortal soul, when they see for themselves the order, grace, and regularity in heaven and especially when they condemn the lack of order here in the sublunary region, as if the immortal soul chose the worse location as fitting to itself and wanted to concede the better location to the mortal soul! (*Enn*., II 9 [33].5.8–16)[41]

The sublunar realm is characterized by disorder, but for Plotinus, the superlunar could only be orderly and consistent. Plotinus would

39. See the Chinese translation in the Taishō canon, vol. 21, text no. 1336, 581a3–5. 此陀羅尼力悉能摧伏, 移山斷流, 乾竭大海, 摧碎諸山猶如微塵. 若日月失度, 能使正行, 悉能攘災.....

40. See the translation in Gerson et al., *Plotinus: The Enneads*, 141.

41. Ibid., 213–14.

have considered the idea of irregular motions that we see in Buddhism to be simply wrong.

Views on astrology

As the final part of this discussion, we can briefly discuss how the two traditions at hand viewed astrology. To clarify, "astrology" in the West generally refers to the casting and reading of horoscopes for various purposes, such as determining the character and fate of an individual (natal astrology) or to determine an auspicious time (electional astrology). Horoscopy emerged in Alexandria, Egypt, around the second century BCE before it spread westward to Europe and eastward to Iran and India. Advanced astrology required a high level of mathematics and astronomical knowledge of all of the planets and terrestrial latitude. Horoscopy was not directly addressed by Plato, but Plotinus and Iamblichus discuss it. India had its own indigenous model of twenty-eight *nakṣatra*s (without the zodiac signs that ultimately originated in Mesopotamia) that functioned as a system of astrology, but initially this was not so mathematically complex. Pingree notes that "the earliest Indian texts which are known—the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, and the Upaniṣads—are seldom concerned with any but the most obvious of astronomical phenomena; and when they are so concerned, they speak with an obscurity of language and thought that renders impossible an adequate exposition of the notions regarding celestial matters to which their authors subscribed." Later, Greek astronomy and astrology were translated into Sanskrit.[42]

In the early centuries, Buddhists certainly observed *nakṣatra*s, as well as the lunar phases (Skt. *pakṣa*s), especially to determine auspicious times. In various texts, such as the Vinaya (monastic codes), the Buddha himself states that timing based on the Moon and stars is important to observe. There is also rich *nakṣatra*-related lore in the

42. Pingree, "Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran," 229, 234–8.

Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna, an early Buddhist text that appends a divination manual onto an otherwise unrelated sūtra. Contrary to what one may initially expect, Buddhists did not apparently see a contradiction between karma and the premise of astrological determinism (e.g., that one's state of mind and intentions should determine the outcome of an action rather than the stars). As we explored above, Mahāyāna Buddhists increasingly incorporated all the planets—including the pseudo-planets Rāhu and Ketu (constituting Nine Planets, Skt. *navagraha*)—into their curriculums and ritual frameworks. In an earlier study, I argued that with a few exceptions, Buddhists throughout history generally display a passive acceptance of astrology.[43] One major exception is the attack on astrology in the *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna-sūtra*, in which criticisms such as the following are expressed:

> Further, that man is truly non-virtuous to carry out the contemplation of counting stars [astrology]; he will also not attain peace. As to the stars, their powers are not constant, for they are hindered, or have superior and inferior capacities; [for instance] this star is again occulted by a superior star; that star at a different time is again occulted by a different star. It should thus be understood that contemplation of the counting stars is unreasonable.[44]

In this instance, the main issue is that monks should be contemplating transcendental topics rather than the worldly art of astrology. The author appears to have possessed only a vague understanding of astrology, but in the above citation, they appear to be referring to planetary conjunctions (e.g., two or more planets occupying the same position). Since the power of a planet is affected by its configuration relative to other planets, the stars cannot be considered a stable path to *nirvāṇa*. This critique of astrology, however, is not representative,

43. Kotyk, "Astrological Determinism in Indian Buddhism."

44. Taishō canon, vol. 17, text no. 721, 290b1–4. 又復彼人數星思惟而實不善; 亦不寂靜. 所謂彼星, 力不常定, 更有妨故, 有勝劣故. 此星復為勝星所覆, 彼星異時而復更為異星所覆. 是故當知, 數星思惟, 義不相應.

as Buddhist criticism of astrology was relatively rare. Buddhist literature actually reveals the opposite: passive acceptance of astrology was the norm. The main issue—at least in theory—was monks and nuns practicing astrology as a livelihood rather than living on alms and the generosity of benefactors. The critique of astrology in the *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna-sūtra* is actually anomalous.[45]

When we turn to Plotinus, we find a different critique of astrologers. In the *Enneads* (2.3), one of the major criticisms of astrologers is that they believe that the planets willingly and consciously inflict harm on people. This would run contrary to Plotinus' idea of the planets as ensouled intelligences operating at the superlunar level, hence it would be unreasonable to assume that such gods would ever have explicit ill will toward humanity. Plotinus also points to the conception of planetary conjunctions as having a causative effect on people. For instance:

> And to call this planet "Ares" [Mars] and that planet Aphrodite [Venus] and to claim they cause acts of adultery if they should be in such and such a position, as if from the licentiousness of human beings they were satisfying their mutual needs, how is this not total nonsense? (*Enn*., II 3 [52].3.6.1–3)[46]

Plotinus was not opposed to the notion that the stars could be signs of sorts. He states, "The stars, then, are parts, and we are, too. Some parts, then, will be understood by means of other parts. Everything is full of signs, and the one who understands one thing on the basis of another is a wise man of sorts" (*Enn*., II 3.7.10–13).[47] His criticism of astrologers expresses more detailed knowledge of horoscopic doctrines than what we read in the *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna-sūtra*.

45. See the relevant translations of excerpts and the discussion of monks and astrology in the Vinaya in Kotyk, "Can Monks Practice Astrology? Astrology and the Vinaya in China."

46. See the translation in Gerson et al., *Plotinus: The Enneads*, 151.

47. Ibid., 152.

This is not necessarily surprising, considering that astrologers were a major community in the Eastern Mediterranean, whereas in India during the early centuries of the Common Era, we do not see much Buddhist understanding of astrology.

Conclusion

Based on the above comparisons, I believe that we can reasonably argue that Buddhist and Neoplatonic cosmologies are not only dissimilar, but they are also incompatible. In light of the Roman and Greek interest in India and the presence of Brahmanical and Buddhist communities in Parthian and Sasanian territories, we can imagine a scenario in which exchanges between Buddhist and Greek philosophers might have, in fact, occurred, but this factor alone does not necessitate that any such meetings happened. Some similarities and parallels are certainly noticeable, such as the belief in reincarnation or rebirth, but when we turn to the cosmologies of the two traditions, the major differences become apparent.

As we explored above, the Greek idea of a spherical earth and cosmos is the most obvious element that highlights a difference in worldviews. Buddhists believed that the surface of the earth is flat, with Mount Sumeru at the center surrounded by four continents. Although by the fourth or fifth century CE, we can infer that *some* learned Buddhists would have been exposed to the spherical model used in Indian astronomy, the sphere was not embraced by Buddhists. Interestingly, they also do not discuss the sphere even as a heretical idea, a point that further indicates an absence of Buddhist interaction with Greek ideas. Also, the Buddhist concept of infinite time (past and future) is unlike what is expressed in *Timaeus*, in which there is a definite start to time by the hand of the Demiurge. Moreover, Buddhist cosmology does not have eternity as an ontological concept comparable to what is taught by Plotinus. This difference is reflected in the Buddhist view of gods, who are fallible, mortal, and ignorant. Such characteristics of the

divine would have been unacceptable for Neoplatonists. Similarly, the Buddhists believed that the orbits of the planets could be imperfect and irregular, whereas they were firmly absolute and regular for the Neoplatonists. Finally, when we look at the views on astrology by the two, Plotinus was basically opposed to many of the ideas of contemporary astrologers—for example, that planets could harm people or cause people to do wicked things—whereas Buddhists passively accepted astrology, apart from a few rare instances. Both traditions treated the planets as deities, but in Buddhism, they were mortal and ignorant like all other gods.

Considering all these major differences, I am confident in arguing that there was unlikely any direct and substantial relationship between Buddhists and Neoplatonists, at least so far as cosmology is concerned. If the fundamental worldviews of the two are so dissimilar, then it makes less sense to suggest the existence of relationships in other domains, such as epistemology or ethics.

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